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School as Enabling Factor of Students' Absenteeism

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Abstract

This study principally investigated the enabling factors that promote students' absence in school. The purposive sampling method was used to select 150 chronic absentees from thirty randomly selected secondary schools in Ibadan, Oyo State. A validated questionnaire developed by the researcher was administered on the study sample. The data collected with the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation. The results revealed that at $X = 3.00$ decision point, the participant agreed that ten out of the fifteen items on the questionnaire could be used to explain their absence from school. On the basis of these findings, it is suggested that the teaching profession should be truly professionalized.

Introduction

The education sector of a country is expected to play a vital role in its national development. Hence, schools wherein educational activities take place at all levels have undisputed roles to play in the act of building a virile nation. The primitive conception that schools have marginal effect on children's performance has given way to the acknowledgement of the fact that school ethics must be considered in any explanation of attainment and behaviour (Lansdown, 1990). If schools, therefore, aim at inculcating certain values, the administration and organization of events in the schools ought to be systematic, orderly and peaceful. In fact, the inculcation of the right type of values cannot be attained in a disorderly or lawless academic environment.

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In the bid to guide against acts that would make the national goal unrealizable in schools, rules and regulations governing student activities are made. Although there are variations in these rules and regulations from one school to another, the need for regular attendance cuts across all schools. Compulsory attendance goes beyond school rules in most developed nations of the world. It is a legal requirement.

Based on the above premise, regular attendance in school is not only an important factor in school success (Rothman, 2001) but also the first condition for school success (Garbarino and Asp, 1981). School absenteeism occurs when students fail to attend school, when they ought to. Despite the fact that laws are made to ensure the presence of students in school, cases of absenteeism are still prevalent. Kaeser (1985) pointed out that cases of absence exist in almost every school.

The high rate of student absenteeism in school had been reported both locally and internationally. In the New York City's second largest public school, Garry (2001) reported that an average of 6,200 or 10 percent of the enrolment is out of the school each day.

There are certain dangers inherent in the non-school attendance behaviour of students. Generally, studies have indicated that students with high rates of absenteeism have lower academic achievement (Baker and Jansen, 2000). Gabb (1997) also asserted that absenteeism not only leads to more tangible forms of delinquency but that it also leads to criminal behaviours, such as thievery, robbery and the use of abusive language. In the world of employment, Eric Clearinghouse on Urban Education (1997) maintained that truancy sabotages opportunities for future employment success.

It has, however, been observed by Harte (1995) that the cause of absenteeism among students has shifted focus from the student as truant to the school, which has become a part of the problem and also the solution. Oloko (1996) equally affirmed that in Nigeria, with regard to indiscipline, school-related factors have received greater focus than extra-organizational factors, such as homes.

A significant number of scholars have attributed causes of school absenteeism to school institutions. For instance, Osarenren (1996) pointed out that the general atmosphere of the school might affect students' motivation to attend school. When schools are not well organized, in some respects, as they ought to be, Gabb (1997) contended that students would play truancy. In specific terms,

Boyson (1975) maintained that schools with low railings and numerous gates, many ineffective teachers in keeping discipline, continuous lesson changes, walking distance of up to ten minutes between classes encourage casual truancy.

Although previous studies do not suggest school as the cause of persistent absenteeism, Reid (1982) maintained that they could, at least, be agents, which decrease or increase the rate of absenteeism. On the contrary, Garbarino and Asp (1981) observed that the major source of non-attendance is exclusion-related factors, occasioned by the schools themselves. One form of exclusion was identified to be the inability of the children, adolescents, and families to meet demands made by the schools on fees, meal changes, books and other supplies.

The professional conducts of teachers had also been reported as factors that are used to explain school absenteeism. One of such is their conduct towards absentees in school. As rightly pointed out by Galloway (1985), students would consider attendance in school unimportant if teachers fail to take absenteeism in school seriously. He added that pressure on students to attend school seldom succeed unless those pupils recognize attendance to be intrinsically worthwhile. Apart from this, most of the enabling factors for unaccountable attendance highlighted by the Maine State Department of Educational Cultural Services (1990) are professional misconduct perpetrated by teachers. These include acceptance of late homework; establishing vague or unenforceable discipline policies; attributing attendance problems to the family only, but not involving the family in the solution; failure to establish school expectancies; the recognition of regular attendance and the setting of low expectation for students.

In his argument in support of teachers as enabling factors of absenteeism, Osarenren (1996) identified three areas of teachers' misconduct. These are teachers' attitude that could make students fear school and thereby stand away from school; teachers with inadequate lesson plan; and strike actions by teachers. Other causes of absenteeism stemming from the schools in the submission of Illinois State Board of Education (1991) include:

- Improper class placement (above or below abilities);
- Failure to identify and provide services for problems of students;
- Insufficient counselling and guidance staff;
- High student-teacher ratio;

- Low teacher expectations;
- Lack of parent-school communication and involvement; and
- Too weak or too rigid administration policies.

In the same vein, Kinder, Harland, Wilkin and Wakefield (1995) included the ease at which some pupils could skip school unnoticed, relationship with teachers and peers and problems relating to the relevance of school and the curriculum to the truant on the school factors responsible for non-attendance behaviour.

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that quite a number of enabling factors in school could be responsible for students' absence. Consequently, it becomes imperative to validate the authenticity of these factors from the viewpoint of chronic absentees.

On this premise, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which the chronic absentees will agree or disagree with fifteen identified enabling factors of students' absence in school. It is hoped that the panoramic view of chronic absentees presented in the study would be useful towards the eradication of absence.

Research Questions

To what extent would chronic absentees agree or disagree with the following as factors being responsible for their irregular attendance at school:

1. distance of the school
2. poor-teacher relationship
3. teachers' strike
4. location of the school in an non-conducive environment
5. teacher's absence
6. poor quality of teaching
7. excessive punishment
8. unhealthy relationship
9. lack of dedication to work by teachers
10. poor attendance policy
11. mass failure
12. sexual harassment
13. teacher's acts of indiscipline
14. non-implementation of rules
15. hatred of teachers

Methodology**Research design**

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study.

Study population and sampling technique

A total of 150 chronic absentees (67 males and 83 females) were purposively drawn from 30 randomly selected schools in Ibadan to participate in the study. The participants range between the ages of 12 and 22 years, and had the mean age of 16 .03 years.

Instrumentation

The school attendance register and a self-developed validated questionnaire were used to collect data from the respondents. The school attendance register was purposively used to select students who have missed more than one-third of the expected attendance in the first and second terms of 2001/2002 session.

On the other hand, the self-constructed questionnaire, which had two sections, contained fifteen positively worded items structured in a five-point Likert rating scale. The highest possible score a respondent could get was 75 (5x15), while the lowest score was 15 (1x15); the higher the score, the higher the level of agreement, and vice versa. The reliability coefficient of 0.71 was obtained for the questionnaire.

Procedure

The researcher, with the support of ten research assistants, administered the self-developed questionnaire on the respondents in their respective schools. The researcher stressed the importance of responding faithfully to the items. The questionnaire, which takes between 15 and 20 minutes to complete, was collected on the same day it was administered. The collected copies of the questionnaire were then scored and analysed.

Data analysis

The responses on the questionnaire were analysed using the descriptive statistics of means and standard deviation. The decision point was put at 3.0. This, therefore, implies that a mean rating of less than 3.0 was regarded 'disagree', while a mean rating more than 3.0 was regarded 'agree'.

Findings

The results of the analysis are presented in table 1, according to the research questions earlier posed.

Table 1: Means and standard deviation of respondents on school factors causing irregular attendance in school (N = 150)

S/N	Item	X	SD	Remark
1.	The distance between where I live and school sometimes prevents me from attending school.	2.85	1.24	Disagree
2.	Lack of cordial interpersonal relationship with my teachers causes my poor attendance in school.	3.02	1.17	*Agree
3.	I am not in school when teachers are on strike.	3.3	1.33	*Agree
4.	My school, which is located in an uncondusive environment, sometimes makes me stay at home to read.	2.97	1.30	Disagree
5.	My non-attendance in school is caused by teachers' absence.	3.00	1.32	*Agree
6.	Poor quality of teaching causes non-school attendance behaviour.	3.02	1.18	*Agree
7.	Excessive punishment of students by teachers increases poor attendance in school.	3.15	1.26	*Agree
8.	Unhealthy relationship between the school administration and teachers or between junior and senior students causes no-school attendance behaviour of students.	3.12	1.26	*Agree
9.	Since teachers pay more attention to extra-mural lessons and petty trading than schoolwork, I sometimes prefer to be absent from school.	3.01	1.25	*Agree
10.	When teachers will not notice my absence in class (stay away from school)	3.00	1.22	*Agree
11.	Mass failure contributes to students' absence in school.	3.27	1.28	*Agree
12.	Sexual harassment by teachers causes poor attendance of female students.	3.38	1.32	*Agree
13.	Teachers' indiscipline sometimes discourages me from going to school.	2.91	1.26	Disagree
14.	Non-implementation of school rules and regulations causes non-school attendance behaviour of students.	2.92	1.13	Disagree
15.	I am sometimes discouraged from attending school because I have some of my teachers.	2.83	1.33	Disagree

*Significant

The mean and standard deviation of chronic absentees' responses to school-related factors responsible for their poor attendance in the school are presented in table 1. The summary of the results in table 1 indicated that the respondents agreed that items 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 could be used to explain their absences from school. On the other hand, they disagreed with the factors in 1, 4, 13, 14 and 15.

Discussion

The findings of this study had amply demonstrated that students are usually illegally absent from school because of a number of reasons, in spite of the danger inherent in the maladaptive behaviour. Disturbingly, the findings also revealed that students' absence could directly be linked to the presence of some factors in the school. Differently stated, students' poor attendance in school is as a result of reflection of unmet education needs and placement problems (Bamber, 1979) or failure of education facilities and authorities to solve purely educational problems (Sellin and Wolfgang, 1964).

It is disheartening to note that items agreed to by the respondents have to do with teachers' unprofessional conducts (See items 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). This, therefore, is in consonance with the Maine State Department of Educational Cultural Services (1990) and Osarenren (1996) who reported that most of the enabling factors for unaccountable attendance in school are professional misconducts of teachers. The outcome of these findings has, therefore, negated the earlier report of Reid (1982) that previous studies do not suggest school as the cause of persistent absenteeism.

The outcome of this study did not provoke any surprise simply because the influx of unqualified teachers into the teaching profession nowadays predictably would have devastating effects on the education sector. This study has therefore shown that one of the effects of employing unqualified hands to teach is non-appearance of students in school. Untrained teachers hardly abide by the professional ethics governing teaching. Some of these untrained teachers are unaware of the dos and the don'ts of teaching, much less abiding by them. Most of them are guilty of professional deceit identified by Amaele and Amaele (2003). These include ineffective teaching, poor teacher/students relationship and the lack of effective communication among teachers, teachers' insensitivity to students' welfare, harsh and authoritarian control of students. This

is, however, not to say that trained teachers are guiltless of these professional misconducts.

Implications of the Findings

The implications of these findings are glaringly obvious. First of all, there is urgent need to professionalize teaching. This in effect would minimize if not completely eradicate unprofessional acts. When this is executed, there will also be the need to sanction acts of unprofessionalism perpetrated by teachers, so that it serves as deterrent to others. Similarly, guidance and counselling services should be designed in such a way that it will cater for the psycho-social needs of the teaching and non-teaching staff.

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